

The Visiting Crow

by Fairest Of Folk

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Summary: When an ancient demon invades Kyoto, the Shinsengumi discover there is much more than just the city at stake. Especially when it takes possession of one of their own. Chizuru/Okita; onesided Chizuru/Hijikata. Supernatural/Romance/Horror. Slight language. Rating may change.

1. A Traitorous Storm

****Hello lovelies! Grae here again (and not even hoped up on cold medicine this time! Le Gasp!).****

****Okay, so...this is kind of a new thing for me. The idea of this story pretty much hit me the day after I posted "The Lovers" (which I might continue, though I'm not certain just yet) and could potentially be viewed as a sequel to that story though you don't have to look at my other story at all to understand what's going on in this one. Actually, I can't promise you'll know what's going on in this one since I've kind of tried experimenting with this story's timeline a little and I'm not sure how it will read for someone who doesn't have the whole mad plot running through their head (aka know the madness of my mind). ****After this chapter the story should run along in a fairly linear way (with some small exceptions) and I will be more than happy to fix things if it becomes too confusing for people to follow. ****

****This story should be fairly short all in all, I can't say with certainty any particular length but I'm hoping to keep it pretty brief so I can get some of my other work finished up. Usually I try and take my time with my stories and try not to work on anything else until I've finished whatever project I'm working on but in this case I'm going to try for a fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants approach to see if I can maybe avoid my usual agonizing. I'm going to try and get as many chapters completed and published as quickly as I can with the intention of going back and fixing up whatever I feel needs cleaning up after the story is complete. Whether that actually happens will**

remain to be seen, but here's to hoping!**

**I absolutely and completely _adore_ reviews and those kind enough to take the time and write them, as well as those wonderful souls who favorite and follow this piece. And I am more thankful then I can ever say for anyone who takes the time to even _glance_ over my work.
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All my love and devotion,

** - Grae **

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A Traitorous Storm

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><p>The shriek of one blade striking another rose and fell in the air like the cries of mystical beast in battle, punctuated by the occasional grunt of pain or shout of rage. Shinpachi was unconscious, his large body splayed as if he and the other two members of the Idiot Trio had wasted the night drinking their combined weight in Sake, though the bloody split upon his forehead and the stark discoloration along his jaw spoke of an altogether different story. Sanosuke wasn't much better off where he was clinging to the splintered and scored pillar of the temple. His left hand was a mess of blood and dislocated digits, his spear even worse shape as it lay scattered around him in pieces barely recognizable as the weapon at all, while a bruise so deeply purple as to look black crept up around his torso and constricted his breathing to nothing more than pained wheezes.<p>

Monks were running about in a flurry simple robes, serious faces and pales of sloshing water as one of the buildings of the Temple came alive with dancing flames. Shouts filled the air, solemn chants and furious howls that were almost familiar save for the horrendous things they sang to the moon. Toshi followed Okita over to the wounded red head, the latter helping to ease their friend and comrade down to the ground as Hijikata took stock of the chaotic world around them. Hajime and Heisuke both were still standing, swords drawn and faces tense, though both men held their blades with the blunt edge of their swords facing out. Wounding blows only, perhaps not even those considering the intense cast to Saito's face and the sickly paleness that was consuming the youngest captain. The figure they battled was a mere shadow, flitting in and out of existence as leapt impossibly over the grounds.

"It...It got Chizuru. It took her..." Harada hissed through clenched teeth, amber eyes dull and flat as the pain threatened to overwhelm him. A cold, painful rock settled in Souji's stomach, his green eyes widening in shock at his friend's words. Sanosuke cursed under his breath, hands clenching tingly around the green eyes captain's arm as he looked up between Toshi and the other captain. "The monks were right â€" _fuck_ that hurts â€" it just...it took her...she's not..." Sanosuke's hand shook as it slipped from Souji's arm, the spear

wielder's form slumping down from the weight of his injured ribs.
"She's not her anymore."

A shrieking groan and the roar of collapsing wood announced the fall of the temple building that had been set aflame, pulling their attention to the battle still raging on in the courtyard. The flames soared, leaping in a high, manic arch towards the twinkling stars above and illuminating the Temple grounds with the brilliant reds and oranges of the madly dancing blaze. Saito looked little better than a shadowed wraith in the near blinding light of the burning temple, his body sliding fluidly from kata to kata as he dodged and blocked the attacking figure's savage rain of blows. The left handed swordsmen never attacked though, never once took the openings in his opponent's form to deliver a killing blow and with the sudden brilliance of the fire illuminating the courtyard Toshi could make sense of the strange decision of the quiet captain. "She's not **her** anymore." Sanosuke's words hadn't sunk in when the red head had first uttered them, hadn't quite made sense. **"It took her."**

"No" Souji's voice was low and pained as it escaped him in a rasp; an agonized denial of what they saw with their own eyes. "No, not **her**" The green eyed man shook his head against the thought, his face pulled into a look of horror at the small figure attacking Heisuke and Saito in sweeping, mad attacks. It was surprising to see the mercurial man look so openly distraught, so painfully striped of his many masks. At any other time Toshi might have paused to consider Souji's strange reaction, analyzed it from every angle until he thought he understood the reasons behind such break in character, but it was not another time and it was " as Souji feared " her.

Chizuru.

Though, there wasn't much left of anything that he knew of as Chizuru. She grinned cruelly, eyes a swirl of ravenous hunger and twisted fury as she assailed both Hajime and Heisuke with harsh blows. Her hair " once warm chestnut before it had been shifted into an Oni's silver " flickered red and yellow in the firelight while her golden eyes burned with a madness that was honestly terrifying to see in her once sweet face. Blood had splatted upon her face " Yamazaki's or Harada's or Shinpachi's or someone else's entirely he couldn't be sure " the deep red a heart stopping sight as it dotted her pale face and stained the delicately curved horns that adorned her forehead. Her movements were fluid and graceful, the blade she held glittering as she handled it with vicious, striking precision. Her pretty face, the face he had always seen glowing with innocence and gentleness and shy, sweet smiles, had been twisted into a mask so spiteful and pitiless that it was nearly unrecognizable as ever belonging to Chizuru at all.

She moved with the feral grace of a half-mad predator, her strikes so quick he could barely see them as she reined blows upon the two captains, her mouth warped into a sinister grin, fangs he never thought she had glinting in the blood red light of the blaze that raged behind her. A manic, savage laugh echoed out from her throat as she kicked Hajime away from her, her hair fanning out around her like a mock halo as she used his hesitation to harm her " harm Chizuru " against him. Saito was thought as the most heartless warrior amongst the Shinsengumi, the one to kill someone without a single thought, and it was true to a point. The quiet man had no qualms with

ending the life of an enemy with cool, calculated efficiency, but he was also a loyal man. For the people who had earned his loyalty, he would unquestioningly lay down his life and die, and for Chizuruâ€|

Hajime would never be able to hurt Chizuru, not even if she was determined to end his life. None of them would.

And she knew that.

Her speed was almost past their ability to see, the Oni blood drawn to the surface pushing her limits far beyond anything they could hope to achieve â€" even with the Ochimizu. With a furious strike to Saito's reversed sword, she had him sliding backwards, his heels digging into the charred dirt of the Temple grounds as she gave him a twisted grin. Another fast blow to his side and he was thrown sideways like he was nothing more than a ragged doll some ill-tempered child had become bored with. She gave a howl of laughter as his dark form slammed against the side one of the Temple buildings that had yet to go up in flames, her eyes bright and glowing with a sinister cast as she watched the violet haired samurai crumple. Heisuke â€" when she turned her malicious gaze upon him â€" didn't have a chance. From their place beside the fading Sanosuke, Toshi and Okita stood frozen in place, stunned into place by the horrible impossibility of the scene unfolding before them.

"Hajime-kun!" Okita's voice rose sudden and stark, his call for his fallen friend but his eyes locked upon the waifish creature that danced and dipped over the shadowed, strangely lit grounds like a wraith. Toshi saw the other man's hands shaking, clenched so tightly upon themselves that the knuckles were presses white against the skin, bones creaking beneath the pressure of his stressed muscles. She had been mid turn towards Heisuke, hips swaying in a tantalizing way she never allowed her body to move, hair swishing prettily with each step before Souji's call caught her attention. She turned, a casual movement, almost as if it was any other day, a moment of normalcy, her small frame burdened with baskets of laundry or trays of freshly made food, one of them calling out to catch her attention to talk, to help her with her loadâ€|but it was not normal. It was not Chizuru, not really, not anymore. Her slim, delicate looking Oni horns glimmered in the firelight, pale against the fall of silver of her hair and the sultry spark of light that sparkled in her golden eyes. She was beautiful, beautiful andâ€|and so very terrible.

She gave them an inviting smile, so strange and wrong on a face that blushed a vibrant red at even the smallest of compliments, the small bow of her mouth curving into a small pout as she looked them over. The tie of her yukata had loosened during her fight with the others and the one sleeve had slipped down to expose delicate, pale flesh along the gentle slope of her breast in response. She didn't bother to pull the cloth back up, to cover herself from their view, instead her smile pulled into a slow, predatory smile as her eyes slide back towards where Heisuke stood shaken and unsure. "Oh, look little pup, they've come to see me kill youâ€|" Her voice was pitched low and sensual, a bedroom whisper that carried over the roar of the burning fire and the shouting monks and slipping inside their minds, tormenting them. She turned to face the youngest captain, hips swaying in an inviting rhythm as she padded silently over to Heisuke on dirty, bare feet, raising her Kodachi so that it lay level with the brown haired boy's heart. He lifted his own sword in defense,

making no move against her oncoming figure.

A sudden gust of wind rushed past the roaring blaze, catching snatches of ash and flame and smoke with it as it shrieked its way across the courtyard. The gale whipped up the dusty, dry ground, curling around her lithe form as easily as a second, unseen skin and in a heartbeat she had disappeared. It was like battling Kazama, a single step, a blink of an eye, and gone. Whisked away by the wind only to reappear a moment later as if nothing had happened at all, in her case to appear grinning and wicked, a hairsbreadth away from Heisuke. The young captain jerked back in surprise, blue eyes wide and confused as he attempted to scramble back and away from her only for her to bring a sharp blow down across his face with the hilt of her sword. His lean body tumbled sideways, his tight grip upon his sword ripped away as she wrenched the hilt out of his hands forcibly and hurling the blade across the grounds. It buried itself hilt deep into the wall, nearly slicing a frantic monk in two as it hurtled through the air. With her chosen foe disarmed, she delivered a sharp kick to his abdomen, knocking him roughly to the charred, dusty ground with a gleeful cackle.

She was going to kill him, Heisuke, Hijikata could feel it deep in his bones. The woman that had once been Chizuru "once", not anymore, Chizuru was gone, gone like all the others "It" had taken in the city, maybe forever "would kill him for the twisted, sadistic joy of making them watch her kill him. Her eyes flicked up to him and Okita, Harada barely conscious as the wind he tried so desperately to grasp slipped escaped him, the gold twinkling dark and dangerous in the light of the raging fire that blazed on beyond them. He was frozen in place, the shock of what he was witnessing freezing the blood in his veins and locking his joints into place. She was going to kill Heisuke, kill him, and Hijikata found himself unable to do anything but stare in horror as it happened.

Heisuke scrambled backwards, feet kicking and slipping upon the dusty dry earth as he attempted to escape the dark creature that had replaced the girl they all knew and cared for so dearly. She grinned down upon him, calmly walking forward with a promising slowness as she leveled her blade before her. She gave the Kodachi she held a contemplative look, her face pinched into an expression of mock wonderment as she gave a cursory glance between her intended victim and her horrified audience. "This weapon is old, you know. As old as the Yukimura clan itself, passed down from generation to generation for hundreds of years. A weapon that has been stained with the blood of countless enemies of the Yukimura Clan." She twisted the blade about absently, catching the burnt orange light of the fire in the shining blade and allowing it to dance from hilt to tip. She turned a low, snarling smile upon Heisuke, his wide blue eyes seeming to delight some crazed part of her. "And now it will be stained with your blood little pup." She slide her gaze over to he and Souji, fangs gleaming viciously as she gave them a hungry grin. "Watch carefully now, a girl only ever gets one first kill. I'd hate for you boys to miss it now."

Heisuke's fingers tore into the dry earth, his last attempts to escape her murderous intention stalled by her one bare foot coming down in a vicious arch upon his midsection, knocking the wind out of him and sending him into a gasping, coughing fit. She laughed as he wheezed, his eyes wide and terrified as she lifted her short sword high above her head. The sight of the impending blow seemed to have

broken the spell upon Souji, the cat-eyed captain jerking awkwardly back to his feet as he rushed to try and stop her. Hijikata jolted, following quickly as he finally got ahold of himself and realized with sudden clarity just _what_ was about to transpire. They both rushed forward, intent on stopping the blow, on saving Heisuke and " if they could " Chizuru, but already knowing the truth of the matter.

She grinned with haunting madness, golden eyes flashing with blood-thirsty glee as she brought her arm down in a graceful arch. The ancient, flawless metal of the blade shone like a star captured from the sky had been contained within the weapon as she brought it down in a single, fatal arch. A precise, powerful death blow that they had no chance to stop. The blade fell.

They were too late.

2. Death on the Air

Welp...here we go with chapter one! **So this one is sort of a filler chapter before we get back to the action. ****I'm not really sure how I feel about some parts of this this, but overall I think it turned out like I wanted and anything I don't like I can go back and edit later on. On a brighter note we have a little plot in here (le gasp!) and, more exciting still, a little romance :D**

**I want to give all my love and thanks to zhere and Black Wolf Roses for being to incredibly kind and sweet as to review and to everyone who was so wonderful as to favorite and follow this story! It means more than I can possibly say that you guys took the time to let me know what you guys thought! _
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All my love,

** - Grae **

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Death on the Air

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><p>It was the hottest summer any could remember. The air was so hot that even the simple act of breathing became a painful process. The ground beneath tired, worn feet was as dry and dusty as cemetery ash while tired citizens shuffled down the many roads and kicked it up into a gritty miasma that choked the city. There was no shade, the sun unforgiving as it beat down upon the city streets and bleached the world bone white with its intensity. The clouds and gentle, life-giving storms the city was used to all but a desolate memory in the wake of the unusual fury of the season. In the marketplace, produce and goods wilted and burned beneath the oppressive heat, the people that passed them by just as lifeless and drained as they survived the long, cruel days. Children did not run and play in the

streets and meadows as children were meant to do, their little bodies stricken by a dizzying sickness whenever they attempted to brave the blistering heat for too long. The life and movement of the capital had been siphoned away, drop by precious drop, until there was nothing left unhindered by an ever worsening exhaustion.<p>

And beneath the sickly calm, madness lied.

She could smell it in the air. The rotting stench of death and darkness choking her every breath, a poison devouring everything it came in contact with unnoticed by the very world it was destroying. The capital had become a boiling pot of short tempers and unexpected violence since the brutal turn in the weather. The darkest aspects of human nature were slowly being drawn to the surface, the haze of the vicious heat serving as a breeding ground for crime and savagery. A heavy cloud threatened constantly, the delinquency and discord becoming worse with each and every passing day. The fear that what fragile peace that had begun to spread through the capital might shatter irreparably resonated throughout the troubled city, an unspoken terror that haunted the hearts of those who wished for a brighter future for their country. It was a mindless, sadistic violence that was polluting the capital and corrupting its people. A hungry scavenger picking at the rotting souls it infected, a furious predator poisoning its prey and toying with its victims as they died their agonizing deaths.

Kyoto didn't have a chance, not really.

"Sen-Hime? Is everything alright?" Kimigiku's voice was low and cautious as the Kunoichi looked apprehensively around the street, diligently searching for the lurking danger her human senses could not really register. A part of Sen wanted to smile at her bodyguard's sharp perceptions and keen instincts, the human woman's skill still impressive to her even after a lifetime of knowing the dark haired ninja, but that respect was swallowed up solidly by the throbbing knot that curled in her stomach and reminded her forcibly of what had stopped her in the street in the first place. She closed her eyes to the too-still world around her, hands clenched tightly upon the smooth silk of her kimono sleeves as a stifling-hot breeze drifted by and toyed with her hair. There was so much w__rong in Kyoto, so much evil seeping from every inch of the city that she could scarcely believe that not one of the humans that shuffled their way down the streets could not notice it.

But then again, they weren't m__eant to notice. Hunters were not in the habit of announcing themselves to their intended prey; cats gave not warning to the mice, wolves no issued notice of hunger to the hare. The creature she could feel at the edges of her senses, stalking the people of Kyoto with vicious, horrendous intention, was no different in its methods. Even Kimigiku - so bright and clever and perceptive to things most humans could not even begin to comprehend - could not see past the unease and discontent that lay heavily upon the surface of the city to the true evil beneath. The malaise of savagery that had settled upon the city was like oil in a pail of water, seemingly obvious in its pollution as it drifted sickeningly upon the surface, but all the while hiding further dangers upon the bottom of the pail. The danger broiling over in the streets was masking the true cause of the city's distress, the demented predator hiding in amongst its quarry as it languidly waited for its next meal to fall into the trap it had set. The very thought made an unreal

chill dance down her spine, the horror of what lurked beneath the uneasiness of the city around her a nightmare she had never thought she would have face in her lifetime.

She opened her eyes to find that Kimigiku had moved to stand before her, the taller woman casting an apprehensive look beneath her long, black locks of hair. She reached out for her friend, taking the weapon calloused hands into her own silk-soft ones, a noticeable tremble shaking her slim body. "Can't you feel it?" Her grip tightened upon her friend, the quivering of her limbs becoming worse as she voiced the torrent of fear and revulsion that tore at her mind, the bitter, terrible aura of the thing infecting the city threatening to overwhelm her. Her voice was small and thin beneath the weight of her words, nearly lost as the heated wind drifted by and bit at their flushed skin. "It's devouring this city, these people!" Her eyes left her friend, moving to the street they stood in, to what the humans could not see, things she was glad her friend was blind to. Terrible shadows and shapes, things most humans only knew of in horrific stories told in the darkest parts of the night in low, fearful whispers. "Something wicked has made its nest in this city."

The wind shifted suddenly, turning violent and blistering hot as it rushed down the street. It began whipping up dust and dirt into the eyes of those tired figures that trundled dutifully through the city, pushing and ripping the people out of its way as it tore by with small cries of protest from the people it bullied the only noticeable response to its presence. It stung as it crashed over her, burning her skin and ruthlessly shrieking into her ears as it shoved her about. The force of it had her stumbling slightly, Kimigiku instantly at her side bracing her against the sudden onslaught from the once mild breeze. She lifted her arms, shielding herself from the biting grit of the dust as it was thrown furiously into her face, wincing as her hair was yanked violently and her clothes were tugged with cruel abandon.

The gust of unnatural wind was gone as soon as it had arrived, the short assault punctuated by the rustle of unseen feathers and the rusted, hungry cackle of a bird of dead and dying things. It sensed her in its den just as surely as she had sensed its presence devouring the city, had taken an offense at her "something beyond the petty humans it consumed" entering its hunting grounds, threatening its cruel games. She turned her head to follow the dancing gale that tore down the street, eyes narrow as she watched the dust storm it conjured flare and die in an instant as it flew off "unseen and not quite noticed" to find itself another blackened heart to gorge upon. She scowled after the intangible shadow, glaring openly at what the humans surrounding her could only see as empty air and settling dust, furious at the wraith's blatant behavior. A maddening, shrieking laughter danced down the street, a cackle of joy and triumph she felt the thing haunting the city unworthy of.

It was mocking her.

"Princess, are you hurt?" Kimigiku's hands were gentle as they settled upon her shoulders, a gentle attempt to draw her attention away from the invisible thing she was scowling after. She kept her gaze settled where it was, detangling herself slowly from her friend's gentle tending as she reached out with her Other senses to trace the taunting spirit's dark aura. The apprehension she had felt

at its presence in the city was still present, a dull, weary throb that pounded in time with her heart, but it had little sway on her in the wake of such blatant provocation from a creature that her kind once hunted for sport. Behind her, Kimigiku shifted hesitantly, her friend's dark eyes searching the street she was searching fervently with no result. "Was thatâ€¦was that it?"

"Yes." Her voice was level, a fact that surprised her with the anger growing in her veins. "It's been here too long. It's grown comfortable here. Content." Her hands clenched into tight fists at her sides. "It's been feeding on these people so long it thinks itself invincible." She turned to look at her oldest friend, eyes bright with fury and the instinct to hunt â€" something her family had worried had been lost in the face of her usually gentle nature â€" burning her from the inside out. "If it goes unchecked, it will devour Kyoto whole." Kimigiki's eyes were hard as they met hers, her friend's pretty face twisted into a hard mask. She knew in that instant that her friend already knew her plan, a small smile of thankfulness touching her lips for the Kunoichi's sharp intelligence. At the edges of her senses she could feel the thing flitting about, hungrily searching for its next meal, its next victim. Its brazenness in its search was sickening, though she knew that once it found its next quarry and began to consume the poor creature she would be unable to track it.

"It has to be stopped."

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><p>Matsumoto sat in stony silence across from her, his back straight and his expression unreadable to her heat-dizzy mind. Beside him his small doctor's case lay forgotten while a tray of tea and sweet *Anpan* sat untouched between them were Yamazaki had left it when he had led the doctor in to her. The tea had been cooled in answer to the unfathomable heat, summer having settled unexpectedly early â€" and unexpectedly harsh - upon the city. She resisted the urge to fidget as the silence stretched on, the absence of anyone else other than them making the awkwardness in the room almost tangible to her frazzled nerves. Despite her apprehension at being alone with the doctor though, she was thankful that the leaders of the Shinsengumi weren't there. It would have made the doctor's visit absolutely impossible to get through and she knew it would be hard enough as it was.

She clutched her hands together tightly in her lap, eyes locked upon her thin fingers as they twisted together, occasionally moving to twitch nervously at the fabric of her hakama or the edge of her long sleeves. Her hair clung to the sweat dampened skin of her neck; an uncomfortable weight that reminded her of how there was escaping the terrible heat that had invaded the world. Outside her room, doors and windows closed tight against prying eyes and soothing breezes, she could hear the familiar buzz and hum of the busy temple. The men of the Shinsengumi hard at work training beneath the brutal sunshine, groups marching dutifully to and fro, as patrols began and ended

meticulously. Monks too could be heard on quiet feet as they walked the grounds of the Nishi Hongwanji Temple, performing their usual duties with dedicated precision and hurried apprehension in the attempts to handle the strange influx of people coming in search of their spiritual aid that had swamped the temple the past week or so. The noise was a comfort of its own, a reassurance that things were still the same as they always had been " even if she knew that they were changing forever.

Matsumoto was the one to break the silence between them.

"Kondou-San and the others are quite worried about you." He looked her over carefully, his sharp features unreadable as he studied her small frame. "He said you haven't been well of late." He moved to pick up a small piece of paper that rested atop his doctor's bag, glancing over Hijikata's evenly written words with a critical eye. "Poor apatite, trouble keeping food down when you do eat, weakness, dizzy spells," He peered over the paper to look at her, mouth pulled into something that was almost a smile. "And in one occasion that seems to have frightened the supposed "Wolves of Mibu" half to death, fainting." Her cheeks flushed from more than just the heat as she recalled the event he was describing. She had been carrying a fresh tray of tea for the captains and commanders, had in fact just entered the room and slide the Shoji closed behind her when a wave of dizziness " much worse than the many others that had been afflicting her over the past weeks " had overwhelmed her and turned the world black as her knees buckled beneath her. The tea she had carried had made a terrible mess " she knew, though no one had said and she had never found any evidence of the shattered crockery " and she had awoken embarrassed and dizzy and still smelling of tea to frantic shouting and panicking Shinsengumi rushing about her room convinced of her imminent demise.

With a faint chuckle, the doctor set the note he had been given down and reached for his tea, sipping it thoughtfully as he waited for her response. A bird chirped cheerfully outside, unmindful of the activity so close to its nest or her own small struggled to find her voice beneath the expectant glance sent to her over the lip of the tea cup. "Yes"I mean" She glanced up at him from beneath the curtain of her damp bangs, nervousness making her mouth dry. "I don't want to worry them, it's not"I" She stopped herself, shoulders creeping up to her ears as she tried to collect her frazzled thoughts. Matsumoto gave a soft sigh and moved to cradle the remaining cup of tea up in his work worn hands and gently folding it into her grasp before she could think to refuse.

"You should drink Yukimura-chan; this heat is hard on everyone" She blinked at him before nodding uncertainly and sipping at the cooled brew. He offered her a small, restrained smile for her efforts and moved to take one of the Anpan from the tray, offering her one politely and returning it to the plate promptly when she frowned and declined. Her stomach rolled at even the thought of food and she was thankful that the doctor didn't insist that she try and eat. "Before his disappearance, your father told me often of your duties back in Edo. He was quite proud of you." Her hands tightened upon her tea, pain of loss and apprehension of what was to come digging in deep and biting hard upon her heart. She flinched away from his dark eyes, his expression knowing as he openly assessed her. "He said that there was no doctor alive equal to your skill when it came to caring for those patients."

"Oh no, that isâ€¦I wasn't â€" " She stuttered, self-conscious at the praise for work she had not thought terribly remarkable, embarrassed even further to have Matsumoto the one on the receiving end of her father's bragging. "Otousan needed help and since I wasâ€¦I mean â€" I just, I merelyâ€¦" Her face blazed red as the good doctor seated across from her chuckled lightly at her babbling, shaking his head in gentle dismissal of her denial. In Edo the duties she had performed had been a matter of course as a doctor's daughter. Those patients preferred a woman attending them and her father had thought her capable enough to teach her the things she needed to know to care of them. She had not thought herself especially skilled or talented, merely properly educated and â€" eventually â€" experienced enough to attend to those who came to her father's clinic as they needed to be treated.

"There is no need for modesty, Yukimura-Chan. You have a skill for such things that I doubt can be easily matched." The doctor took another sip of his tea, setting his Anpan back down upon the plate as he settled a serious expression onto her. "I only mention it becauseâ€¦well," He sighed, closing his eyes for a thoughtful moment as he bowed his head before giving her another dark eyed stare. "Your experience with those sort of patients is extensive, certainly more than enough to recognize the symptoms that the men you are staying with have described you having." Her hands trembled around her cup as she found herself unable to look away from the bald man's knowing gaze. "I imagine you already know."

She swallowed, dropping her gaze to the cup in her hands as the silence from before settled heavily upon them once more. She tightened her hold upon her tea, fighting her trembling hands, and pointedly replaced the cup to the tray between them. "Yesâ€¦Iâ€¦" She trailed off, unable to bring herself to look up at the doctor as her hands shakily moved to rest over her abdomen. "I suspected for some timeâ€¦" A soft, sad sigh escaped her, her head bowing low to cast her face in shadow beneath the cover of her long bangs. "The women in Edo would complain of such things in the early stages of their pregnancyâ€¦and when I fainted the other dayâ€¦" Her palms pressed gently â€" nervously â€" over the fabric that hid her stomach from view. She was just beginning to show, not enough to be visible beneath the layers of her clothing, the small swell so subtle not even her lover noticed as he held her through the night. But it was enough for her to notice.

Matsumoto gave a long, tired sigh, his eyes closing as he gave one small nod at her confirmation to his suspicions before a small smile pulled at his lips. When his eyes opened, the smile had grown, a low, vague humming accompanying his amused expression as he looked at her. "The doctor come a-runnin' and smilin' at the fun. To think a solider lad should have a daughter or a son.*****" He shook his head in amusement, chuckling lightly at his own soft singing before allowing a full, hearty laugh to escape him at her dumbfounded stare. The doctor stood, moving to stand beside her and settle a large, calloused hand upon her shoulder gently. "Never mind my girl, an old song sung badly by an old man for the sake of his poor sense of humor." He knelt down beside her and tugged her own small hand gently into his larger ones, patting it gentle in a way that reminded her of white haired grandfathers doting upon favored grandchildren. Despite her confusion, she found herself smiling at him. "I doubt there is anything I could tell you about your condition that you don't already

know Yukimura-chan, but pleaseâ€|be sure to take care of yourself? Pushing yourself will do you nor the child any favors, hmm?"

Some of the mirth left his face, but only some and she found herself strangely comforted by his gentle acceptance of her pregnancy. She was able to forget the brutal heat and her rolling stomach and pounding head for the moment, was able to focus on the joy to be had in bringing a child into the world. For all the thought she had given the early months of her pregnancy, she had not yet allowed herself to be _excited _over the coming child. It was nice, being able to pretend at normalcy for a time. It was a relief, having someone to share her secret with, even if she knew the relief was only temporary "Of course Matsumoto-Sensei."

Though, despite her relief there still remained the worrying prospect of telling her lover of the newsâ€|as well as the rest of the Shinsengumi captains.

She felt sick at even the thought of it.

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><p>Chizuru was watching them from her place in the doorway of her room as his patrol returned to the Temple Grounds, her eyes faraway as they tracked his movements with slow, exhausted meticulousness. Yamazaki stood beside her, balancing a tray of food and tea in his hands as he spoke to her with a tight expression upon his face. Matsumoto had come and gone it seemed and Chizuru was being â€" as she had been for the past weeks â€" evasive on the matter of her health. He was too far away to actually hear what they were saying, but he knew the spy well enough to recognize the barely veiled look of exasperation. He also knew _Chizuru_ well enough to recognize the petite woman's aggravating stubborn refusal to let others help her carry her burdens.

He tugged unhappily at his sky blue hoari, scowling as the damp fabric clung to him like a second skin from the sweat, before pulling it off completely and tossing it over one arm. The men in his patrol followed his lead, soft groans of exhaustion lifting from their weary forms as they collectively headed for the nearby well to try and cool off. He allowed his gaze to move away from the two across the courtyard to the men of his patrol, considering dumping a bucket over his own head for the sake of the temporary relief of it, before turning his back and heading over to the shade of the awning. On the porch, Yamazaki shook his head tiredly to himself, offering the girl that sat before him a small, disbelieving smile before ruffling her hair affectionately and heading off to whatever duties he had put on pause to speak to her. The violet eyes spy offered him a short wave as he headed off towards the kitchens and with a small grin Okita waved back before turning his attention to Chizuru.

Her doe brown eyes were glassy as they settled on him, her face flushed red over a too pale complexion that had been worrying him and the others for several days. He frowned as he came closer and â€"

glimpsing the tray Yamazaki was carrying away " noticed that the food that rested upon it was untouched. He folded his arms, trying to ignore the discomfort of the extra heat and the stickiness of his damp skin, and allowed his eyes to narrow upon her weary looking form. She offered him a smile, small but sincere, as he climbed the short step and came to stand over her. "Hello Okita-San," There was something strained in her tone, a hollow, weariness that worried him more than even her fainting some days previous had. "How did your patrol go? Susumu-kun said that there was a bad brawl earlier today"

He ignored her question, arms crossed and frown firmly in place as he stared down upon her, noticing the tremble of her hands upon the cup of cooled tea she cradled before he closed his eyes and shook his head at her. "You're not going to get better if you don't eat, idiot." He dropped his hands, propping them up onto his hips as he stood over her and studied her small frame carefully. She had tied the sleeves of her pink Gi back in the attempt to help keep herself cool in the blistering heat, though it had done little to help the beads of sweat that formed upon her brow and trickled down her pale skin. A small bucket of water and a ladle rested at her side, no doubt Inoue or " perhaps more likely - Yamazaki had brought it for her to sip on throughout the hot day to try and keep her cool. She had at least seemed to have stayed put that morning instead of attempting to stubbornly continue her chores around the compound like she had been doing. Though he had to admit that bodily hauling her off and locking her in her room the day before had been amusing " her tiny squeaks of shock had nearly been as funny as Heisuke's near apoplectic reaction to his brazen actions - he felt better knowing that she was following their wishes and staying put. Even if it was only because he and the other captains had made it clear that, for once, they were in complete agreement about how her recent poor health should be treated.

He pulled his sword and Kodachi free of their place at his hip and settle down at her side, leaning against the cool wood of the wall with no small measure of relief as he propped his sword against his shoulder and dropped his hoari beside him. The shade offered some measure of relief from the heat, but not as much as he hoped it would. Her head dropped in embarrassment down to peer at the half-empty cup in her lap, her cheeks glowing an even more brilliant red than before, "I'm fine, really" It was just a few dizzy spells" He cast a disbelieving look at her, sharp green eyes studying her profile with a critical eye. She was a stubborn creature, too stubborn for her own good really. He turned his gaze towards the compound, leaning his head against the wall as the hand he had resting between them moved subtly to rest upon her knee.

Her hand slipped from her tea to rest atop his, she was so small and fragile compared to him, and he shifted so that he held their palms pressed together, fingers lacing tightly. Silence settled over them for a moment, comfortable and secretive, as he stroked the soft skin of her hand with a calloused thumb. "And what did Matsumoto-Sensei say? If it was just your fainting it wouldn't be an issue, over half of our men have passed out from working too long in this. You're not well." He looked at her from the corner of his eyes, watching as she stared down at their linked hands " their small sign of affection hidden between their bodies, hidden from the view of anyone who might have wandered by at a distance, another secret amongst so many secrets. Her expression was one he could not read, a soft, strange -

almost contemplative - look that he had seen on her more and more often over the past few weeks. She was always a puzzle, an oddity he could never quite figure out no matter how hard he tried " though he did like the challenge of trying anyway.

"Souji" He thought he could feel a small tremble in her hand as he held it, her voice holding an uncertainty he didn't like hearing when she said his name. He held her hand tighter, tilting his head down to look at her. She kept her gaze upon their hands, her long bangs falling in her eyes and hiding them from him. He wanted to reach out and brush them away, cup her cheek and tilt her head up so she couldn't hide from him, kiss her until she was breathless and dizzy from things other than the terrible heat. Her fainting so many days previous had scared him in a way that he hadn't really been aware he could be scared. The image of her laying there, crumpled upon the ground like some abandoned doll framed by shattered pottery and spilled tea, had burned itself into his mind. Flaring into horrific life every time he closed his eyes, tormenting him in sleep with nightmares of her death.

She lifted her head to look at him, a small frown pulling at her lips as her small movements pulled him from his tortured thoughts and back to her " alive and well. She looked uncertain, not afraid but definitely not as comfortable with him as she should have been. An unreal chill slipped down his spine at her expression, apprehension twisting his stomach as she studied his face with a worried eye. "Souji" There's something" She paused, biting her lip as he searched her face for some hint of what she was trying to say to him. The apprehension he felt before growing into a solid, painful rock in his stomach as she tightened her hold upon his hand. "There's something I need to "

A furious scream filled the air, a long stream of cursing rising and falling like some unholy bird's song echoing out from the entrance of the Temple.

Chizuru flinched at the sudden pandemonium, her soft brown eyes turning quickly towards the source of the chaos. He tightened his hold upon his sword as he followed her gaze, eyes narrowing in frustration as he released her small hand and shifted to get to his feet. Anger burned in his veins at the sudden interruption, the hope that he might actually get some answers from her about her poor health " something she had steadfastly avoided talking to him about even in the privacy of her room late at night " being snatched away by, of all things, a collection of monks trudging through the main gate with a cursing, screaming, spitting behemoth of a man being dragged along with them.

He cursed under his breath at the sight, replacing his sword to his side as he realized that the commotion had brought the rest of the captains flooding into the yard and ruined any chance at all he had of spiriting her away and continuing their conversation. She ignored his pointed warning look and got to her feet as well, her face pulling into an expression of worried apprehension at the chaos reining in the courtyard, whatever it was she had been about to tell him lost in the wake of the latest disaster to be dropped in their laps. He turned, intent on saying something " what he didn't know " but stopped himself at the last moment. He could see Hijikata heading in their direction, the Vice Commander's face pulled into a deep scowl as his sharp eyes took in the border-line riot the

monks had brought to the Temple. He sighed and looked to her, wanting to reach out and touch her, reassure her " she looked wane and tired and so, so breakable " before turning on his heel and rushing over to the mess taking over the front gate.

Later.

A part of him, bitter and cruel and too honest to listen to for too long, wondered just how long he was going to shove everything off for later. Her recent sickness, his illness, their relationship " hidden from the view of the others as if it was something to be ashamed of " all to be pushed off for later. How much longer could he pretend that he had the luxury of time? He glanced over his shoulder, to her slim, weary frame watching him leave her behind. The heavy, cloying breeze lifted some of her sweat soaked strands away from her pretty face. She was beautiful. Tragic, and beautiful.

He turned back to the monks and the man and a furious Heisuke being called a "little pup" in the midst of a slew of vulgarities shouted at the top of a mad man's lungs.

Later. He would talk to her later.

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><p>Translations:

****Kunoichi: **Female ninja**

****Anpan: **Traditional Japanese sweet roll filled with red bean paste (excellent with tea)**

***** **This is actually a snippet of a(n altered) version of the song "Handsome Cabin Boy." _The _actual_ song is about a girl who wants to be a sailor and disguises herself as a boy and serves as the captain's cabin boy (sound familiar?). Of course the captain eventually figures out that his cabin boy is a she and (eventually) the girl ends up pregnant and freaking all the other sailors out by going into labor one night, which of course is when they all figure out that the cabin boy is actually a girl. The change in the lyrics above is meant to be Matsumoto's own changes to fit the situation Chizuru's found herself in.**

The real lyrics for that part of the song is:

"Oh doctor dear, oh doctor!" _The cabin boy did cry
>"My time has come, I am undone and I should surely die!"
The doctor came a-runnin' and a-smilin' at the fun.
>To think a sailor lad should have a daughter or a sun.

End
file.